

action within individual episodes may move at a fever pitch, it often does little to advance the series' overall narrative arc. Thus, Higgins describes the form's singular logic as a puzzling mix of "narrative compression and willful inefficiency, of intense repetition and seemingly endless extension, and of breakneck action without forward progress" (27).

Highlighting the sound serial's links to play, Higgins shifts his focus to the form's common typologies. At the heart of the serial is "the weenie" (55), a term silent serial queen Pearl White is said to have coined to describe the physical object that sets the plot in motion as heroes and villains match wits for its possession. In their quest for this MacGuffin-like prize, dueling characters often travel through worlds populated by bizarre machines and intricately designed trap devices whose processes are granted considerable screen time and, ultimately, rarely advance the action. Following work on silent gag films and the silent serial, *Matinee Melodrama* sheds considerable light on this kind of filmic proceduralism as enacting an operational aesthetic vaguely akin to children's games. It is a style that, in foregrounding how things work, solicits audience pleasure.

Within a narrative architecture that, Higgins argues, is structured by action-driven game play, the villain serves as a "game master [who] by laying traps . . . transform[s] the world into a space of physical challenge, focusing the serial's operational aesthetics into a contest for survival" (63). In each episode, of course, this contest terminates in a cliffhanger demanded by the genre. Drawing from psychology, Higgins likens such formulaic endings to a "problem space," defined as "a participatory structure that cues viewers to seek some piece of withheld knowledge" (77). By denying closure, he suggests, cliffhangers extend audience engagement beyond the theater as viewers are left to mull over potential solutions to the seemingly impossible predicament. In other words, viewers mentally *play* with potential solutions during the weekly gap between installments.

While the unusually tight production schedules and shoe-string budgets may help to explain serials' formulaic tendencies, Higgins demonstrates that opportunities did exist for bravura storytelling and inventiveness. "Serial artistry," he argues, "tends towards refinement rather than invention" (120). Higgins takes up two extended case studies of serials made at Republic that elevated the form. The first, *Daredevils of the Red Circle* (John English and William Witney, 1939) is exemplary for its virtuosic use of the studio's talented stunt team and its skillfully choreographed fight sequences that adeptly navigated the frame, circumventing the need for additional camera setups; the second, *The Perils of Nyōka* (William Witney, 1942), is notable for the stunning

complexity of its narrative world and its "unusually ambitious" camerawork (155). Brief attention is also given to the resourcefulness of Universal's editors, who had the creative audacity to craft a complete chapter of the *Great Alaskan Mystery* serial (Lewis D. Collins and Ray Taylor, 1944) by appropriating and recutting footage lifted entirely from a 1933 feature.

Higgins ultimately contends that the influence of the sound serial lives on today in James Bond, Indiana Jones, and Jason Bourne, devoting the instructive final chapter of *Matinee Melodrama* to teasing out the resonances of this forgotten form in some of today's most popular media franchises. In studying an early iteration of moving image seriality, Higgins's study may thus serve as a useful jumping-off point for future scholars. As a whole, *Matinee Melodrama* demonstrates the value of mining even the most prosaic of cinematic forms, and how its largely obscured tracks still guide and propel mass entertainment.

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BOOK DATA: Scott Higgins, *Matinee Melodrama: Playing with Formula in the Sound Serial*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016. \$90.00 cloth. \$27.95 paper. \$27.95 e-book. 224 pages.

## JONATHAN KIRSHNER

### ***Better Living through Criticism: How to Think about Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth* by A. O. Scott**

Movie criticism, indeed professional criticism of any kind, is a precarious enterprise. Two existential, inescapable challenges haunt the endeavor. There is something—the word must be confronted—parasitical about the entire business. Artists pour blood, sweat, and tears into their craft, only to have some critic wander by, and, with a few aspiring-to-be-clever words written on deadline, share their (perhaps career-defining) musings on the matter. Or as Lou Reed put it, with reference to one of the greatest rock critics in the business, "Could you imagine working for a year and you get a B+ from some asshole in the *Village Voice*?"

There is also the vexing matter of taste. Art, after all, is art—not science. There is no right or wrong, and limited opportunities to share and establish "objective criteria." No one can tell you what to like—what you like is what you like, and anyone who tries to tell you otherwise is, ironically, wrong. Moreover, tastes change, and even the most respected voices of authority can be gob-smackingly mistaken. Lewis Mumford, reviewing the Chrysler Building for the

*New Republic*, trashed the joint, dismissing its “inane romanticism” and “void symbolism.” If the dean of America’s architecture critics could swing and miss like that, what is the real “value added” of criticism after all?

Contemporary film criticism is also under siege. The crisis of print journalism has undermined the security (and employment opportunities) of professional, paid-their-dues critics—not that anyone would necessarily notice, as the sheer number of movie-reviewing voices has proliferated impossibly, most of them writing for free. And who needs a critic to tell you if a movie is “good”—that is, to serve the productive function of consumer guide—when numerous internet aggregators instantly take the temperature of the public taste?

For reasons large and small, then, it is an opportune moment to hear from the erudite and literate A. O. Scott, one of the chief film critics for *The New York Times*. Unsurprisingly, *Better Living through Criticism*, Scott’s rumination about (and defense of) movie reviewing as a profession, is smart, thoughtful, learned, and engaging, and he confronts all of these questions, and a few others as well, head on. The book is organized as a series of loosely knit chapters (which can be seen individually as discursive thought pieces on various themes) interspersed by “dialogues”—essentially conversations the author has with himself, in the form of the mock interview. In less skilled hands this artifice could fall on its face, but they account for the strongest and most enduring contributions *Better Living* has to offer. The dialogues brim with pearls of wisdom and are disarmingly self-critical, as Scott proves a most aggressive interrogator (he seems to know all of the defendant’s secrets)—a most welcome (even if calculated) move.

Indeed one might urge casual readers to come for the conversation, and dip into the text to taste. Scott makes a number of very strong arguments, and his defense of criticism is robust, and largely right, starting with his flag-waving insistence that readers *think* about things, rather than passively consume what is put before them: “to pay our own experience the honor of taking it seriously” (8). Scott occasionally has show-offy digressions involving Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke that don’t add much, and is not above writing, for instance: “We can talk about Beethoven and Goethe and Hegel—or Dante, Velázquez, and Milton—some other time” (10). Nonetheless, *Better Living* establishes some essential touchstones, warning against the “tendency to venerate the past, deprecate the present, and despair of the future” (187) and identifying as a critic’s “duty” the need to “call attention to what might otherwise be ignored or undervalued” (256). And it is right on in describing that the voice

of a critic should be, “above all, an honest voice, a voice that can be trusted. Not obeyed or blindly agreed with, but trusted in the way you’d trust a friend” (165).

Scott is less effective, however, in his moments of increasing ambition, when he reaches beyond the defense of criticism as complementary to and even essential to art, and tries to situate criticism as an art form in and of itself. Criticism is indeed complementary and perhaps even essential, but to make claims for art is to skate out on very thin ice. For if criticism is an art, it is distinctly dependent on the art of others, and this is an invitation to overreach. According to Sidney Lumet, Pauline Kael once announced that her job was to show filmmakers like him “which direction to go in,” to which Lumet rather pointedly retorted, “in other words, you want the creative experience without the creative risk” (Lumet, *Interviews*, University of Mississippi Press, 2005, 119). Scott does not go that far in his claims for the role of criticism, but the weak spot of *Better Living* is that in rallying to the defense of his profession, he chooses to spend the bulk of his ammunition fighting the wrong battle—or at least the battle that will not win the war over the enduring importance of criticism. “Criticism is not nice,” he declares. “To criticize is to find fault, to accentuate the negative, to spoil the fun” (121).

This is wrong, and the wrong place to plant one’s flag. As Bill Murray explained, definitively, in *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984), he was “a little fuzzy on the whole good-bad thing.” And that goes double, at least, for movie criticism. The least enduring feature of criticism is whether a critic “liked” a movie or not, something increasingly irrelevant in a world of internet meta-scores of aggregate opinions, professional or otherwise. Readers whose shelves are full of critical anthologies are not looking to be told what is “good”; rather, they revere those critics who can help see things in a film they might otherwise not have seen on their own, and who offer commentaries that invite a conversation (or even an argument).

That is why I like to read critics—and Scott is one of the best in the business today—*after* I’ve seen a film. In his review of *A Christmas Tale* (2008), Scott wrote of its director, Arnaud Desplechin: “His films are headlong, ardent explorations of failure, misunderstanding and emotional warfare, which turn out to be roughly synonymous with nobility, generosity and love” (November 13, 2008). Tying together two wildly different films of Olivier Assayas, Scott observes that “*Summer Hours* [is] as compact and modest a film as *Carlos* is wide-ranging and audacious” and notes: “Both films are driven by a concern with the effects and contradictions of globalization” (September 24, 2010). Of *Midnight in Paris*

(Woody Allen, 2011), he notes: “It is marvelously romantic, even though—or precisely because—it acknowledges the disappointment that shadows every genuine expression of romanticism” (May 20, 2011).

While *Better Living through Criticism* has much to offer along the way—especially in its dialogues—only toward the very end does Scott finally push completely past the good-bad diversion to nail the case for the vital, essential, enduring role of criticism: “a critic is a person whose interest can help activate the interest of others. That’s not a bad definition. I should have thought of that before” (256).

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## JOANNA E. RAPF

### ***Young Orson: The Years of Luck and Genius on the Path to Citizen Kane* by Patrick McGilligan and *Citizen Kane: A Filmmaker’s Journey* by Harlan Lebo**

The Orson Welles centenary took place in May 2015 and the seventy-fifth anniversary of his most famous film occurred just a year later. Marking these two milestones, Patrick McGilligan’s *Young Orson* and Harlan Lebo’s *Citizen Kane: A Filmmaker’s Journey* are fitting tributes to a man whose reputation seems to grow with time; together, they build on existing scholarship and add new bricks to an expanding foundation that houses the awesome treasure, mystery, and magic embodied in Welles and his ambitious and complex life.

McGilligan’s *Young Orson*, as the title suggests, focuses on the years that have not, until now, had the attention they warrant. The prolific McGilligan, whose oeuvre includes books on such figures as Alfred Hitchcock, Clint Eastwood, and Oscar Micheaux, among others, has published a massive volume that he spent four years researching and writing. McGilligan has done his homework, skillfully integrating material from biographies, letters, interviews, documentaries, archival sources, and court records. The text reads remarkably well, blending the personal, professional, and scholarly without ever seeming pedantic or, at the other extreme, gossipy. His principal aim is to fill holes and correct negative assumptions that have contributed to the mythology surrounding Welles (749). The wealth of detail that he

includes, exhaustively retracing everything Welles encountered in his young life that might have prepared him for and contributed to *Kane*, is reminiscent of the work of John Livingston Lowes on Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), an apt analogy since Coleridge’s famous “incomplete” poem is referenced in *Kane* and there are parallels between the frustrating genius of the English Romantic poet and Welles himself.

To read *Young Orson* from cover to cover, from “before the beginning” through his birth, early years, life at the Todd School, and travels in Ireland and abroad, is gradually to get to know personally an extraordinary young man. The experience is so endearing that by the last chapter covering his final appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show* and his lonely death, there is the sense of having traversed not just a mythic life but a very human one.

The book starts slowly with background on his parents, Beatrice and Dick Welles, both of whom were accomplished in their own ways. The industrial backstory on Orson’s father is sometimes hard to follow; however, he emerges as a successful businessman, unlike the father in *Citizen Kane*, despite their shared drinking problem. Orson’s mother, however, was truly remarkable and possibly a musical prodigy in her own right. An accomplished pianist and active suffragette, she gave recitals in her home and seems to have befriended many of the artists and musicians who passed through Kenosha, Wisconsin, where Orson was born, and Chicago, where the family later moved after his parents separated. It is even rumored that she had an affair with Enrico Caruso, lending some credence to the interpretation which contends that the character Mary Kane had an affair with that defaulting boarder who left her the deed to the Colorado Lode.

Richard Welles’s mother was also named Mary, but the mother in *Kane* bears little resemblance to Mary or Beatrice other than the piano in the background of the boarding house, indicating that she also played. It’s interesting to note, however, that William Randolph Hearst had a similarly accomplished mother, Phoebe Elizabeth Apperson Hearst, whose nickname according to various sources was “Rosebud,” and that Hearst’s strongest objection to Welles’s film was not the suggestion that Kane drew on his life, but rather in how it portrayed his mother (Lebo 218). In addition, something not mentioned by either McGilligan or Lebo is that both of Hearst’s parents were born near the small town of Rosebud, Missouri.

The question of the origin and meaning of Kane’s final word inevitably comes up in both books. Both authors seem to take with a grain of salt, maybe even a lot of salt, Gore